



**Krieg, Joann P. ed., Walt Whitman: Here and Now; and Eve
Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literature and Male
Homosocial Desire [review]**

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REVIEWS

Joann P. Krieg, editor. *Walt Whitman: Here and Now* (prepared under the auspices of Hofstra University). Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1985. viii, 248 pp. \$29.95.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. x, 239 pp. \$22.50.

In 1980, for the 125th anniversary of the First Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, a colloquium was held at Hofstra University, and most of the papers delivered there are included in this *Here and Now* volume. It is unfortunate that there has been such a long delay in publication, particularly since only one author acknowledges in a footnote other studies appearing in the five year hiatus. Since there is no explanation of the long delay, some readers may assume the scholarship is current and thus be misled. Other scholars, aware of recent discoveries and hypotheses, may consider the scholars in *Here and Now* to be remiss in not being *au courant* in the very area of their specialty. In our generation there are many conferences sponsored by universities, but it is certainly incumbent on the institution to publish the proceedings promptly or not at all (so that contributors can publish elsewhere). To defer, especially for five years, is to embarrass the participating scholars and perhaps bring their scholarship into question.

Otherwise this is a valuable collection of interesting papers, with certain articles concerning Whitman's homosexuality having particular importance in light of Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men*. The *Here and Now* volume opens with prefatory comments by Joann Krieg, editor and Whitman scholar at Hofstra. Next, the legendary godfather of Whitman studies, Charles Feinberg, extended his greetings. His modest reference to the first Whitman letter he purchased sixty-five years ago should remind us all of our own debt to him for his many "benefactions" to the Whitman "Industry." The book proper then begins with valuable comments and summaries by William White of what was then (in 1980) current Whitman scholarship (pp. 3-6) and concludes (pp. 217-224) with that indefatigable bibliographer's wise and sprightly remarks on the continuing industry up to 1984.

In the particular concern of this present book review on Whitman and homosexuality, there are many articles in *Here and Now* that cannot be examined in depth here. Yet they should at least be noted. In Part I, "Biographers and Critics," Justin Kaplan gives interesting brief analyses of the early biographies, with a neat remark on the O'Connor, Burroughs, and Bucke books as each "a campaign biography on a man nominated and vigorously running for the office of American bard" (p. 11). Milton Hindus provides a lively comment on the anti-Whitman critics from the beginning on. Moving ahead to Part III, Jon Rosenblatt studies Whitman's intense absorption in words and language, while providing a challenging analysis of "As I Ebb'd" (pp. 106-113). Gregory Haynes examines "Patrolling Barnegat," explaining the region, its history and dangers, and analyzing the rhetorical functions of the language patterns. David Cavitch, working toward his new book, *My Soul and I* (1985), examines the autobiographical and family implications of "This Compost" and the treatment of women in "Song of the Broad-Axe."

In Part IV, "Whitman and America" by Jerome Loving provides a good firm statement on Whitman's reluctance to consider the black question in relation to Democ-

racy of his own time and/or the future (pp. 139–146). Robert Scholnick in “The American Content of Democratic Vistas” provides a fine analysis of other contemporary essays comparable to Whitman’s; of particular interest are those of Godkin and Frothingham in the *North American Review*, and notably Eugene Benson, who did a fine series of essays in *Galaxy* to match Whitman’s own efforts. (Perhaps because of the delay or the uncertainty of publication of the conference papers, Scholnick used some of this same material for a separate study of the ever-surprising *Galaxy* in *Journal of American Studies* for April, 1982.) William Burrison’s article on *Drum-Taps* accepts Burroughs’ defense of the poet as “the lover, the healer, the reconciler . . . a great tender motherman”—but see Joseph Cady below.

Part V, “Whitman and the World of Literature” has three comparative studies. John Gatta in “Whitman’s Re-Vision of Emersonian Ecstasy” takes the “Transparent eye-ball” sequence from *Nature* to show similarities to and differences from comparable passages in “Song of Myself.” Dennis Renner, in “Lear and the *Leaves of Grass* Poet,” uses Lear and other well-known literary characters for insights into the persona of the poetry. Adrian Del Caro, in “Whitman and Nietzsche Compared,” makes a much needed correction of the standard comparison, showing that Stavrou’s book misses some quite significant differences.

The section by-passed in the above synopses is Part II, “Here and Now: Contemporary Views,” which includes a number of key essays that relate to Whitman’s homosexuality. James Tanner, in “Whitman and the New Morality,” considers what Whitman would say about four contemporary issues: Watergate, Women’s Role, Gay Rights, and Vietnam. On Gay Rights, Tanner points out that “no other poet has been so frequently invoked—and rightly so.” Although Whitman is inclined to be “Strident in so many other areas,” he is “never so in his treatment of homoerotic themes.” Indeed, to Calamus, “the poet brings a quiet dignity, a casual acceptance, a moral tastefulness, and a genuine spirituality to the subject” (p. 39). There are, then, in this well-stated standard view, no surprises here. Nor are there in Stephen Black’s “Reading Whitman Psychoanalytically” where the attitude is somewhat more accepting than in his 1975 *Whitman’s Journey into Chaos*. Black’s analysis of the Symonds-Whitman interchange about Calamus is balanced and helpful, as are his remarks on the most useful mode of reading the Calamus poems. He does not, however, indicate his awareness of Robert Martin’s notorious article, “Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’: Homosexual Dream and Vision” in *Partisan Review* 42 (1975), 80–96, which began this decade-long concern with Whitman’s homosexuality. Nor does he indicate his awareness of Joseph Cady’s treatment of the Calamus cluster in his well-known article in *American Studies* 19 (1978). Nor, unfortunately, does Black seem to be aware of Robert Martin’s detailed analysis of each Calamus poem in his *Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (1979), pp. 47–89, although it is possible that Martin’s book was too near that date of the Hofstra Conference (April, 1980) to be known.

Joseph Cady, mentioned above, has one of the major essays, “*Drum-Taps* and Nineteenth-Century Male Homosexual Literature” (pp. 49–59). This is the first clear and in many ways convincing analysis of *Drum-Taps* as primarily and intentionally homosexual poetry. Cady finds that for the homosexual poet writing in a homophobic society two related “inventions” are both characteristic and essential. The first is “self-invention,” for homosexual poets “had to devise completely on their own a positive symbolism and terminology for gay experience” (p. 52). The second is “self-protective,” for their “culture placed rigid strictures on any public admission or

expression of homosexuality and imposed an absolute ban on any positive and dimensional representation of it." Strangely, Cady overlooks or forgets that Calamus had appeared five years earlier and occasioned no scandal, nor repression, nor character assassination. But, according to Cady, "gay authors faced two potentially clashing kinds of 'invention' that complicated their enterprise profoundly and often gave their texts a marked intricacy."

The practical advantages that a war setting had for a homosexual writer were that "it provided a ready made same-sex situation" and also provided "a sanction for expressing male-male feelings openly." Indeed, "the often tragic materials of war provided gay writers with an elegiac framework through which they could state homosexual feelings openly yet 'safely'" (p. 53). Two poems are analyzed from this homosexual perspective, "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" and "As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado." By implication, all other poems in this cluster are similar manifestations of this homosexual-poetic strategy.

Cady acknowledges but rejects the once fairly standard view that in *Drum-Taps* homosexual love is sublimated, and refers to Samuel Coale's "Whitman's War: The March of a Poet," *WWR*, 21 (1975), 85-100. This article, compared to the standard view, "is a rare dissenting discussion, but Cole [*sic*] does not elaborate on his outright statements about the homosexuality of *Drum-Taps*" (p. 59). But Coale's statements were hardly "outright" at all. Rather, Coale says he thinks Whitman probably was homosexual but whether he was or wasn't doesn't really matter—what matters was the intensity of that love, not its peculiarity. Cady also quotes Whitman on this same issue in a letter to O'Connor that *Drum-Taps* "had none of the perturbations of *Leaves of Grass*" (p. 50). Cady's position seems to be that *Drum-Taps* certainly did have those "perturbations" which, however, Whitman had so disguised that only insiders (fellow homosexuals) would recognize them. Outsiders (males who are straight or square or innocent, and women of whatever qualifications) would not understand.

Those "disguises" are also the concern of Alan Helms in his brief essay, "Hints . . . Faint Clews and Indirections: Whitman's Homosexual Disguises" (pp. 61-67). Like some other essays in this collection, an extension and elaboration appears later as "Whitman Revised" in *Études Anglaises*, 37 (1984), 257-271. One can hardly plagiarize oneself, especially when the original appears later, but a reference to the Hofstra Conference would have been appropriate. Of particular interest in the original paper is the use of a gay slang term, "cruising," to augment the disguises a homosexual poet must use in a homophobic society. Helms quotes from the brief lyric (Calamus #29, 1860 ed.), "One flitting glimpse, caught through an interstice," in which Whitman writes about himself sitting in a barroom corner holding hands with his friend. The odd arrangement here of the poet "being simultaneously an observer and the observed is a common one for homosexuals" and "is characteristic of gay sensibility" (p. 65). This experience "takes on an emblematic significance in the activity of cruising," which becomes a stylistic feature of the early poetry (presumably, the first three editions). Helms develops this insight: "Cruising is a complicated activity which signifies many things. It is a disguised exposing; it is also a blatant hinting." This approach to Whitman's style is new and is skillfully worked out, with many well-known lines and passages as examples. Some examples, indeed, demonstrate "the ultimate triumph for a homosexual writer," which is a "disguising of homosexuality so complete that it becomes invisible, thereby saving straight readers from the discomforts of fag meanings" (p. 66). To the extent that this is true, one may

wonder who is helping whom by unveiling the disguise.

But Helms has the answer, for "Whitman himself would surely have us read him so at long last, for anyone who hints repeatedly at a secret wants to be found out" (p. 67). Indeed the "exciting tension in Whitman's poetry between the impulse toward disguise and the impulse toward exposure explains why it is that *Leaves of Grass* creates the impression of cruising the reader, a book in search of lovers." If, in a homophobic society, this was the only method available, one would assume it would continue. But not so. In the 1984 article (written after the 1980 paper but appearing before it) Helms traces the consequences of Whitman's growing fear that his homosexuality would be discovered and that he would thereby lose the prize of being *the* American poet. Helms thinks the 1860 edition was Whitman's best try for national success as the country's poet, and when it failed the poet was forced to a different method of reaching his dream as the American Bard. It became clear "that the stumbling block between him and public acceptance was the central position of sex in his poetry" (p. 264). "Between 1860 and 1867 Whitman works out a solution to this dilemma" by stopping "writing the homosexual love lyrics" and beginning "a lifelong process of revision, rearrangement, and expurgation designed to disguise or remove the homosexuality of his early writing" (pp. 264-265). This is a stronger version of a standard view of the change in the poet and his poetry, but there are serious questions.

There seems little doubt that these two essays will become part of an important book. On the way to that, there are some minor slip-ups that need to be corrected, as "the four hundred and twelve young men" who were slaughtered at Goliad, not at the Alamo (p. 258). But of more significance are some larger questions Helms needs to resolve. Was the cleaning-up of *Leaves* between 1860 and 1867, or after 1865? That date would coincide with the Harlan fiasco, would lead to the *Good Gray Poet* of 1866, Burroughs' *Notes on Walt Whitman* of 1867, and Rossetti's expurgated *Poems of Walt Whitman* of 1868. Again, what evidence is there that Whitman was more concerned with homosexuality as a danger to his reputation than with the frankness of his anatomical and heterosexual description? The one review that Helms quotes at any length ("that Whitman commit suicide") makes no reference to homosexuality. In fact the special meaning of Calamus was not perceived until many years later. And is it true that, in response to this fear of exposure, Whitman "stops writing the homosexual love lyrics?" Cady's good case for *Drum-Taps* would indicate otherwise.

It is true that, after the Civil War, Whitman began "a lifelong process of revision, rearrangement, and expurgation" of his poetry, but it was not only "to disguise or remove the homosexuality in his early writing" (pp. 264-265). He also retained a lot and added an important defense of manly love, adhesiveness, etc. in *Democratic Vistas* and in the "1876 Preface." And one last quibble: on p. 270 Helms scolds Whitman for refusing for so many years to answer Symonds' questions about Calamus but "then in a fit of pique lets go with a whopper about having fathered six illegitimate children." Crafty old Whitman (and young Whitman too) never, but never, did anything "in a fit of pique." It was a whopper, to be sure, but it was carefully calculated to misdirect the naive, yet also to signal to the insider that anyone who asks such an "entrapment" question deserves such an answer.

But Helms does gather and present a damning account of Whitman's attempts to conform to social standards he didn't agree with. "Those minutely looking can detect a frightened man, doggedly at work trying to hide the evidence of his sexuality."

Again, there is no evidence that Whitman was "frightened" but much to show his efforts to fit the "good gray poet" label. And we all need to be reminded, as Helms does here, of "the exorbitant cost Whitman paid for the widespread public acceptance, and with it the fame that mattered so much to him" (p. 271).

There is one more pair of essays that has the same confused bibliographical record as those mentioned above. M. J. Killingsworth presented his "Walt Whitman's Pose and the Ethics of Sexual Liberation" at the Hofstra Conference (1980), heard the other papers there, in particular that of Joseph Cady on *Drum-Taps*, and developed another article, "Sentimentality and Homosexuality in Whitman's 'Calamus,'" for *ESQ: Journal of the American Renaissance*, 29 (1983), 144-153. The two should be considered together, although the *ESQ* essay is the major study. In the *Here and Now* paper Killingsworth draws attention to the criticism of Whitman by a sex radical critic and contemporary, David Croly. In his *The Truth About Love* (1872), Croly blasted Whitman for what was considered his primitive view of married love but seemed to have ignored or quite misunderstood Calamus. By implication, few readers in America understood what Calamus was all about. But in England Symonds did, and the valuable part of Killingsworth's paper is the full examination of the background, circumstances, and consequences of the Symonds-Whitman interchange. It now seems clear that Whitman knew very well that whatever he replied to Symonds would be circulated among the Calamus readers in England, and so replied with that in mind. To that extent Killingsworth confirms Helms's supposition noted above.

But both scholars miss the trap that Symonds had innocently set for Whitman. Had Symonds asked Whitman in person (as Oscar Wilde might have done on his visit) the poet could have cautioned the questioner, admitted the homosexuality, and warned that he would deny it if there should be any publicity. Since that couldn't be done in correspondence (which might be saved and circulated), what more useful response than to concoct a story so wildly incongruous that no homosexual reader of Calamus could possibly believe it but would understand that the very absurdity of the macho claim was a signal to keep up the pretense. Killingsworth is correct in closing his account of the Symonds-response episode by referring to and quoting from that often overlooked "Memorandum at a Venture" which has Whitman's last public statement of his poetic treatment of sexuality. Helms, writing in a sexually liberated generation, blasts Whitman for his over-caution. But one wonders what would have happened to Whitman's reputation if it had come out during the Oscar Wilde trial that Symonds had a letter from Whitman (which could be subpoenaed) acknowledging that Calamus was indeed written to celebrate homosexual love.

A further inference of that letter to Symonds has never been made but should be. In a homosocial-homophobic society, those very disguises that Cady, Helms, and Killingsworth recognize as necessary for the homosexual poet's survival are found not only in the poetry but in the man himself in all of the self-protective devices of his everyday life. Grover Cleveland could be elected President even though he had an illegitimate daughter. But if it had been on his record that he had a male, not a female, lover he couldn't even have got into the nominating convention let alone get the nomination. That Whitman would prefer to be known for having six bastards rather than six boyfriends shows clearly that he fully understood the homophobic bent of his society, and thus his audience, so not only the poetry but also the man are affected. His habitual fibs, the conscious deceptions, the heinous manipulation of his

friends, the petty distortions in his own autobiographical accounts—all these are not happy events to remember, but they certainly testify to his full conviction that American society was going to remain homophobic for as long as he could foresee. Our revisionist criticism certainly has knocked Whitman's character all-to-hell, but that the poetry will still survive is a remarkable tribute to his art.

Killingsworth's *ESQ* article on Calamus makes another interesting contrast with Helms's article in *Études Anglaises*. He is surprised as we all are that Calamus escaped homophobic denunciation during Whitman's lifetime. He believes it could not have been accidental, so he examines Calamus to discover and evaluate whatever could contribute to its freedom from homosocial attack. He finds that most of the genteel critics disliked Whitman but only T. W. Higginson (Emily Dickinson's "friend") finally said what bothered him. In reviewing the death-bed edition for the *Nation* in 1892 he notes a "curious deficiency . . . of anything like personal and romantic love. Whenever we do come across anything" like it, "the object always turns out to be a man and not a woman." But this mild reproof was written after Whitman's death and serves only to highlight the quite remarkable success the poet had in deflecting criticism.

From Killingsworth's angle, then, Whitman was successful in the very activity Helms blames him for. The poems which would be most revealing of the intensity of male-male love were the two that were deleted after 1860. Also, the "cult of sentimental friendship" was part of the popular literature of the period. This attitude is explored to show how Calamus might, for the unsuspecting reader, be seen not only as acceptable but as admirable. Again, the converting of homosexual emotions to elegiac uses (he acknowledges Cady's paper) also put male-male affection in acceptable terms. He also shows that Whitman sought literary precedents for Calamus themes. On this point he seems to be the first to use the "Notebook on Plato" in the Feinberg Collection, in which Whitman finds "a depiction of male-male love in the language of heterosexual romantic love" (p. 48). This is true enough, but Whitman does acknowledge in a parenthetical comment to himself—"it is astounding to modern ideas"—how far out all this would be to the contemporary social attitudes of 1858–1859, when these notes were made. But Killingsworth's point is that all of these elements testify to Whitman's controlled style and rhetorical skill that once was and still is successful in avoiding scandal.

The other two articles in this grouping are by Harold Aspiz, "Walt Whitman, Feminist," (pp. 79–88) and by Howard Parsons, "Whitman's World-View: A Contemporaneous Message" (pp. 89–97). Parsons' article was originally an introductory speech of a general nature and is somewhat out of place in its present context. Harold Aspiz's article was apparently not part of the 1980 conference and does seem somewhat misplaced in a section which deals so much with homosexuality. But it is an important statement, explaining both why and how Whitman tried to balance his sexual message to women as well as to men. It is still true, however, that Whitman shows little comprehension of what feminism, in the present sense of the term, is all about. This is no criticism of Harold Aspiz, for no one could have made a better case. Rather, the limitation is that of society a century ago. Although Whitman was somewhat in advance of that society, he still didn't go very far. Even Hawthorne in his characterization of Hester is far ahead of Whitman in understanding women's reaction to their society.

It is unfortunate that the Hofstra conference did not have a first-rate feminist on

the program to show where Whitman stood on issues central to the feminist movement. It is not a matter of what he has to say about women, for Harold Aspiz has done that superbly, but rather what *Leaves*, as the *magnum opus* of life in America, should say about women but doesn't. It would be important to know whether homosexuality (of either sex) is such an intense and absorbing preoccupation and starts early enough in the life of the homosexual that it alters the conception of the other sex. For instance, is it possible that well-known and seemingly approving comments about women in *Leaves* and *Democratic Vistas* might be seen by women readers as patronizing and demeaning rather than progressive? Again, in one of the early key passages in "Song of Myself" (ll. 44–48), Whitman writes "Out of the dimness opposite equals advance." But how "opposite" are the sexes in his presentation and how "equal" are they, both in reality as he portrays his period and ideally as he predicates the country as it will (or ought) to be? For such major questions to Whitman readers of this and the next century, the feminist scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick does not provide the answers, although it is clear she is capable of doing so.

Her book is the third in a new major series, *Gender and Culture*, coming from Columbia University, and it relates to this review of Whitman scholarship only through her final "Coda: English Readers of Whitman" (pp. 201–217). Her major concern in the previous 200 pages is with English literature as witness to and testimony of the subordination of women in a homosocial society, a relationship which is complicated by various manifestations of homosexuality. She begins with Shakespeare's sonnets and ends with *Leaves of Grass*, for "both texts have figured importantly in the formation of a specifically homosexual (not just homosocial) male intertextuality" (p. 28). It is never quite explained why Oscar Wilde or A. E. Housman might not have provided a more appropriate Coda for this study, although she does say that Whitman was "a Victorian homosexual shibboleth, and much more than that, a step in the consciousness and self-formation of many members of that new Victorian class, the bourgeois homosexual" (p. 28).

Sedgwick's purpose in the Coda is to trace and demonstrate the course of the Calamus-*Democratic Vistas* themes into the 20th century. She selects two Whitman disciples, Symonds and Carpenter, representing two different interpretations. Symonds uses his reading of *Leaves* to shape his ideal of society as "Dorian Chivalry," a code linked to aristocratic class structure, male dominance, and female subordination. Carpenter's interpretation was, by contrast, much more democratic, eagerly supportive of equal status for women, even socialistic in its dreams of the future. Sedgwick traces the friendship of these two men and explains the role of Oscar Wilde and D. H. Lawrence in modifying in near-opposite fashion the Whitman gospel of Symonds and Carpenter respectively. Carpenter's program is clearly most supportive of women, she believes, and its decline has less to do with Whitman than with the larger social and economic changes of the new century.

The Sedgwick book doesn't add to the homosexual criticism of Whitman's poetry, nor does it begin a new period of concern with a different focus, i.e., the feminist understanding of *Leaves*. Perhaps a by-product of the homosexual emphasis may indeed have been that woman scholars are turned off by (or turned away from) Whitman studies. There are now as many women as men in the profession, but a spot check of recent Whitman bibliographies shows only one entry in six or seven by a woman scholar. Perhaps the unintended challenge of Sedgwick's study may occasion a serious examination of *Leaves* from the feminist point of view.

It is still too early to estimate the full consequences of the decade of homosexual criticism surveyed in this brief review, but some attitudes are apparent. There now seems to be no argument as to whether Whitman was or was not homosexual. Rather, it is taken for granted that he was, and the concern is with the consequences to the poetry. It was once assumed that if there was homosexuality anywhere in the poetry, it would be in Calamus. But that has now been extended to *Drum-Taps* and such larger poems as "Song of Myself" and "Sleepers." Much of this criticism has gone unchallenged, although the shrewd and witty criticism by Calvin Bedient ("Whitman: Overruled," *Salmagundi*, 58-59 [1983], 326-336) is a welcome exception. Behind some of the homosexual criticism has been the assumption that Whitman would have written more openly and frankly about his homosexual actions and attractions if he had dared or if his society had not been so homophobic. But "indirection" was his method in all his poetry, as he himself frequently pointed out. Indeed, what possible poetic value would any of the Calamus or *Drum-Taps* poems gain if their language had been changed to make their homosexuality openly apparent?

There have also been some losses. A major one is the diminishing of much of the poetry-reading to a sort of *romance à clef* in which the reader finds himself distracted with word-changes and line-revisions as homosexual clues. Thus, one finds oneself wondering about the implications of the reversal of roles in "Myself" (l. 781 in 1855), "Coming home with the bearded and dark-cheeked bush-boy. . . . riding behind him at the drape of the day," to the final edition (l. 782) "Coming home with the silent and dark-cheek'd bush-boy, (behind me he rides at the drape of the day.)" Such niggling distractions are the by-products of a serious confusion of some homosexual critics that the homosexual meaning of a poem is its poetic meaning. It is, unfortunately, all too easy for the rest of us to follow along in this detective gamesmanship and get distracted from the poetry.

Finally, there is no indication that Whitman longed for the day when he could "come out," in the sense Jeffrey Weeks uses the term in *Coming Out* (1977). If he ever hoped or dreamed of someday publicly acknowledging his homosexuality and thus being freed of the evasions and cover-ups that complicated his career as well as his poetry, there is no record of it. Perhaps others in his generation believed that "the truth shall make us free," but he was not so naive. Indeed, the artistic challenge of saying what could not or should not be said does seem a true motivation not only for the homosexual poems but for everything he wrote. He couldn't have known of Emily Dickinson's caution: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," but in poetry, in correspondence, even in those late confidences with Horace Traubel, he practiced it all his mature life.

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